

Media release

Helping children deal with family violence

9 April 2008

Number of pages: 1

“Footsteps to Feeling Safe is about giving children the skills so that they understand violence is not okay, it’s not their fault, and that it is important to seek help,” says Kirsty Rees, Footsteps to Feeling Safe coordinator for the Wellington region.

“By the end of the 12-week programme each child will also have a safety plan, which they have practised and feel confident that they can use if the need arises.”

This week, 19 children in the Wellington region are attending Footsteps to Feeling Safe programmes run by Barnardos New Zealand. Another 16 are lined up for programmes due to start when the current ones finish. The programme, which aims to counter the detrimental impact of family violence on children, is run by Barnardos with approval and funding from the Ministry of Justice and Child , Youth and Family. It is offered in communities throughout the country.

“We use a mixture of play, creative activities and discussion to help children deal with issues such as the secrecy surrounding family violence, the loss of a parent/caregiver, managing anger and expressing feelings appropriately and developing safety plans,” says Kirsty.

“Although, in most cases, the violent family member no longer lives in the child’s home, safety cannot always be guaranteed, which is why a safety plan is so important.”

“The safety plan may involve arranging an escape route to a trusted neighbour or hiding in a lockable room such as a bathroom or laundry. Most children also have a cell phone that they can take with them to call for help.”

The impact of family violence on children is widely recognised. Children exposed to family violence live in a constant state of heightened anxiety, and may have trouble sleeping, trouble learning, health problems, low self-esteem and behave in ‘challenging’ ways at home, school and elsewhere.

“Family violence covers physical, emotional and verbal abuse. It is not restricted to any socio-economic group – it cuts across boundaries,” says Kirsty.

“As well as helping children deal with the present, Footsteps to Feeling Safe aims to cut the cycle of family violence.”

The programmes are run on an individual, group (up to six) or family basis, with sessions held once a week for up to 12 weeks. The children’s resident parent and/or primary caregivers support the children’s involvement and attend three of the 12 hour-long sessions.

In Christchurch, Barnardos is also running a pilot programme (based on a Canadian model) for the mothers of children on the Footsteps to Feeling Safe Programme. The focus is clearly on the needs of the children, and feedback from participants has been very positive.

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Barnardos New Zealand runs Footsteps to Feeling Safe programme in the South Island (Balclutha, Blenheim, central Otago, Christchurch, Dunedin, Invercargill, Nelson and Queenstown) and in the North Island (Gisborne, Hamilton and surround region, Lower Hutt, Porirua, Rotorua, Tauranga, Upper Hutt, Wellington, Whangarei and Whakatane).

Barnardos is also the host agency for ten Advocates for Children and Young People (a Ministry of Social Development initiative). The Advocates provide advice, coaching, education and support to those working in the community with children and young people exposed to family violence. They endeavour to ensure the voices and needs of youth who are living in family violence situations are heard and acted upon.